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Birthright or burglary?



Screen capture from John Featherman's U-Turn interview with 2015 GOP mayoral candidate Rhashea Lynn Harmon.

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ON PAPER, it seemed like a straightforward landlord-tenant dispute: Property owner Francine Beyer evicted tenant Rebecca Lyn Harmon from her Center City loft for failing to pay rent, and police arrested Harmon after she and three friends allegedly tore down the eviction notice and broke in last month.

But Harmon's appearance in court yesterday to face criminal mischief and related charges for the break-in was anything but straightforward.

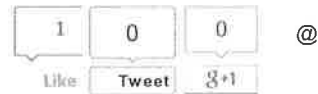
"By taking us past the bar, you're violating international law," Dante Morris, 45, barked, when Judge David C. Shuter ordered Harmon, Morris and two co-defendants to the defense table for their preliminary hearing. The four then proceeded to shout "Objection!" so often during the half-hour hearing that few of the witnesses testifying could complete a full sentence.

The four say they are "Aboriginal Indigenous Moorish Americans," sovereign citizens who don't recognize local or federal laws and have claimed Beyer's apartment - and in fact, the entire building at 13th and Hamilton - as theirs by birthright.

All rejected their lawyers, the judge, the eviction, their criminal charges, the court hearing and even their own names. (Harmon, for example, said she is R. Lynn Hatshepsut Ma'atKare El.)

"Are you aware that the people who you have falsely called defendants are actually heirs to this land?" Morris - or rather, Nanye Amil El - asked the judge yesterday, as cops who had been waiting in courthouse corridors for their cases to be called crowded into Shuter's courtroom like kids drawn to a Disney movie.

Shuter, alternately exasperated and amused, didn't buy it and held all four for trial. He gave Harmon until June 29 to remove her belongings from Beyer's loft and set a formal arraignment for June 23.



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As if the case weren't surreal enough, Harmon, 38, is an attorney (who goes by yet another name, Rhashea Lynn Harmon) who may or may not be a Philadelphia mayoral candidate. In February, she spoke to GOP ward leaders in Port Richmond as a Republican mayoral candidate. A month later, she told the *Inquirer* that she was unhappy with her party and instead would make her mayoral bid in the Nov. 3 general election as an independent. Yesterday, she ignored a *Daily News* reporter's questions, including whether she still is pursuing the mayor's seat.

She, Morris and co-defendants George Dill, 44, and Delilah Passe, 65, entered Courtroom 903 in uniforms - white or black pantsuits and maroon head scarves for the women and maroon fezzes for the men. Less than a minute after Shuter took the bench, deputies booted them out when they ignored an officer's "All rise!" order.

Later, they refused to sit at the defense table - until an irked Shuter threatened to hold them in contempt, saying: "You're going to go to jail if you don't get up here. So I'm going to give you another 30 seconds to get up here."

Thirty seconds later, they grudgingly filed behind the defense table.

Beyer testified that Harmon moved into the loft in July and quit paying rent in September. Beyer, who has owned the loft for three years, took her to court and won the eviction case in May. A day after Beyer had the locks changed, a neighbor called police on May 18 to report that someone had bashed Beyer's door in. Officer Michael Haas testified that he found Harmon, Morris, Dill and Passe inside - and all claimed the apartment as theirs.

"Protest!" one of the co-defendants called out as Haas spoke.

"There's no such thing as 'protest,'" Shuter replied. "Overruled."

"Objection!" the four immediately chorused.

A sighing Shuter answered: "If I overrule it, you don't object to the same thing again. Overruled."

During a break in court proceedings yesterday, a weary Beyer told the *People Paper*: "I'm a nice person. All I want is the rent."

Instead, she said, Harmon has accused her and her attorney Susan Kupersmith of war crimes, as well as planting a poisonous spider in the loft to bite her.

"Give me the keys to my home," Harmon wrote in a rambling email she sent to Kupersmith two weeks after her arrest.

Of Harmon's sovereign claims, Beyer said in disbelief: "Apparently, it's a thing."

It is a thing, experts say. The religion, founded in the 1920s, is based on the belief that African-Americans are of Moroccan, or Moorish, ancestry and preceded Europeans on North American soil. That has led some to claim others' properties as their own, ignore tax bills, refuse to get passports, driver's licenses and license plates or otherwise disobey local and federal laws. The Southern Poverty Law Center considers Moorish Americans a separatist, extremist group.

In court yesterday, Passe carried a miniature Moorish flag - until a court officer demanded she put it away lest it be used as a weapon.

She and her co-defendants carried illegible signs they held up in mute protest whenever court staffers asked them questions.

When their case ended, one cop left the courtroom smiling: "I kind of enjoyed that. I'm glad I stayed for that." A spectator awaiting another court case muttered: "Get 'em out of here. They crazy!"

Beyer estimates she's lost \$15,000 in rent since her tenant troubles began. "And that doesn't include attorneys' fees," she added.

She recently sold two other investment properties and thinks she'll sell this loft, too, burned by her experience with Harmon.

"It's beautiful - a European-style kitchen and bath, with high ceilings and huge windows," Beyer said. "But I just want to not deal with it anymore. It's occupying too much of my time and giving me too much stress."

A lawyer in the courtroom added: "I've had lots of crazy, but this is over the top. Squatters, I see all the time. This, not so much."

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